The Reformed Theological Tradition and the Presbyterian Church (USA)

The Tradition Appropriated by a Congregation

I fell in love with the Reformed Tradition and it began to be formative for me before I had a name for it. I became a Presbyterian when the local Presbyterian pastor heard that a new young couple in the neighborhood had a sick baby and he paid a visit in their home. They were so taken with his kindness and his prayers for their child that they joined his congregation and took the infant to church one Sunday for Baptism. The minister's name was the Reverend Mason Cochrane, and although I do not recall meeting him until many years later, he held me in his arms, and poured the waters of baptism on my head, and assured my parents of the covenant promise of God, and told the congregation sitting in the pews that Sunday morning that they were my sponsors, my "Presbyterian God-parents," and that it was their responsibility to nurture me in the faith so that one day I would confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and come, at the last, to his eternal kingdom.

That baptism took, as far as I'm concerned. I grew up in that congregation, and it was there that I first asked the kinds of questions that brought me to my vocation as a minister.

I loved the Reformed Tradition before I had a name for it. And even though the tradition chose me, as it were, I, early on, started to chose it and claim it as my own.

Mason Cochrane was followed by Robert Graham, an eloquent Texan who enthralled us with his sonorous voice. On Good Friday night, at a candlelight service during which he read the accounts of the crucifixion and cried out, loudly, in the darkened sanctuary, "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthaii," I was touched to the quick with the pathos of the passion

But it was the Reverend Leslie Van Dine who made me a Presbyterian and lifelong lover of the Reformed Tradition. Van Dine was a decorated

Army sergeant in World War II whose call to ministry came in the intensity and mortal danger of combat. After the war he went to college and on to Yale Divinity School and then came to us. Yale! I didn't know about university Divinity schools. Van Dine had an odd voice, small and high for a big man. He pretty much read his sermons, I recall. But he was a reader, and he laced his sermons with references to books and essays and movies. He even quoted the *New York Times*! My parents were entranced. Even when his democratic politics irritated my thoroughly Republican father, Dad still admired the pastor's intellect and courage. In a controversial sermon once, Van Dine said he didn't hope that everyone would agree with him. He did hope that, even in disagreement, his people would respect him. My parents did, and I became aware of a unique way of being Christian, which included a thoughtful engagement with the intellectual and political life of the world outside the doors of the church. It was an unforgettable day when Van Dine criticized the Daughters of the American Revolution, a conservative organization that included in its local chapter membership Dad's sisters, my aunts Inez and Peg. The DAR, which owned Washington's Constitution Hall, had denied Marian Andersen, an elegant and distinguished vocalist, the right to sing, because she was an African American. Van Dine publicly criticized the venerable organization and said, perhaps quoting someone else, that "the best part of the DAR was underground!" My parents, not exactly social activists, loved it. The congregation, school teachers, a few physicians, and bankers, was stunned.

Van Dine, and the theological tradition he represented, which I now know was Presbyterian, Reformed at its very best, took the life of the mind, my mind and intellect seriously. He persuaded the Sunday School to adopt the new Presbyterian Faith and Life curriculum, the first graded Christian education resource, and I received those wonderful hardback books, *The Master's Men, Fire Upon the Earth, The Bible Speaks to You,* and even when unread, those volumes reminded me that Christian faith is not only

compatible with the life of the mind, some of it could be conveyed in honest-to-goodness, academic-appearing text books.

Van Dine also took the world seriously. Racial prejudice was an appropriate topic for biblical, theological critique from the pulpit. He surprised his congregation, and delighted me, by getting involved in our community and city, helped organize a council of churches, I recall.

While all this was going on in my Presbyterian congregation, I was attending a large evangelical Baptist church on Sunday evening with my next-door neighbor chums. The Baptist youth group (BYPU) was a lot livelier than our small Westminster Fellowship. The music was interesting and singable, the meetings featured Bible memorization contests at which I excelled, and they had picnics, hayrides, and food at every occasion. They also paid a lot of attention to matters that didn't seem to concern Mr. Van Dine, like smoking and drinking, playing cards, dancing. I am extremely grateful to the Baptists for making me memorize scripture and reminding me regularly that it is imperative to choose, to decide, to be a disciple. But the counterpoint between the incipient otherworldly faith of my Sunday evening chums and Van Dine's robustly this-worldly religion made me a grateful Presbyterian.

It was sitting in that Presbyterian sanctuary that I first heard J. S. Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" and knew that, as Virginia Wirtz was struggling with its almost mystical counterpoint, I was hearing something important and durable. Sitting in that pew one morning, as we started to sing the opening hymn, "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee," mother nudged me and pointed to the name of the composer at the top of the page—Ludwig van Beethoven.

What finally compelled me was my first experience with science, Darwin, evolution, and Genesis 1 and 2. When I told my Baptist buddies that I heard and was entertaining the notion that creation took a long time, a lot longer than seven days, and that maybe we had evolved, they went ballistic

and hauled me off to talk to an authority who could prove the historic accuracy of Genesis. When I mentioned it to Mr. Van Dine, he smiled and said, “Yes, that’s [evolution] generally how we believe it happened and it is perfectly compatible with what we believe is important to know and believe about God.”

Intellectual rigor, intentional worldliness, an open-minded trust in God—the Reformed Tradition given to me by the community of Presbyterian Christians who promised to nurture me and be my sponsors.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) sees itself as an institutional expression of the Reformed Tradition. When we ordain and install ministers and church officers, Elders and Deacons, the Moderator asks each candidate a list of ten questions. The first question asks each candidate to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Presbyterian church, in this first ordination question, affirms the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the world and the church, and the Christological nature of our theology. It is through Jesus Christ that we believe in the triune God.

The second question posits the Reformation focus on the centrality and authority of Scripture and places our trust in Scripture in the context of our historic experience that words of Scripture become God’s Word to the church and us, as individuals, by the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the third ordination question, the church names and claims its institutional bedrock.

> Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

Every time I hear that question, or ask it in the context of the liturgy for ordination, I marvel at its complexity, not to mention its length, and the powerful way it identifies the foundation of our church—"the essential tenets of the Reformed faith." Someone from outside might wonder why, if we regard the "essential tenets of the Reformed faith" as worthy of adoption, we don't identify them and ask candidates for ordination to affirm and subscribe to them.

Why, instead, do we refer the candidate to a book, *The Book of Confessions,* a rather big book at that, containing eleven separate creeds and confessions spanning the entire history of the Christian church from the earliest days, from The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, through sixteenth-century Reformation, the explosive upheavals of the twentieth century, right up to the present, A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (USA) 1983–4, a big book of 370 pages, including index?

The reason why we don't list the "essential tenets of Reformed faith" is that Reformed faith—the Reformed Tradition—is not a list of theological propositions. It is a tradition, a living tradition at that, and a living tradition resists being pinned down too precisely, instead preserves its own energy and responsibility to respond to history, which is constantly changing. Each of the eleven creeds and confessions in the *Book of Confessions* has an historic context. And that fact means that Presbyterians, reflecting that responsive Reformed Tradition, will always be writing new statements of faith and never be content and convinced that we finally have got it all right, finally, once and for all, have nailed Christian faith down tightly.

At various times in our life as a Presbyterian church, some of us have wanted to do that, to identify and express a list of essential tenets. It happened two times in particular, each a product of some in the church believing that the Christian faith itself was under attack from hostile forces in the culture, the Fundamentalist–Modernist debates in the early part of

the last century, and the controversy surrounding the Re-Imagining God Conference and related issues in the 1990s. In both instances, some believed that the historic confessions of the church did not adequately express the Reformed Tradition and that the church needed to say, as precisely as possible, what the essential tenets are.

Both efforts, and others like them, failed. And the reason is that the Reformed Tradition is not a list of beliefs but a way of being Christian, a way of being a church of Jesus Christ.

Professor Anna Case Winters proposes that the Reformed motto, “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda,” challenges all of us, however we define ourselves on the theological spectrum. She also observes that when we are arguing and disputing with one another in the church, a particularly and thoroughly Presbyterian habit, we try to appropriate the Reformed Tradition and motto and press them into the service of our own agendas and sometimes even wield them as weapons against those who differ from us.

Presbyterian theologian Brian Gerrish offers a helpful observation about statements of belief, creeds, and confessions. “Their primary use is not to smoke out heresy but, through constant recollection, to preserve identity. They prevent disintegration by maintaining a common language, a community of discourse, without which the fellowship would suffer group amnesia and might dissolve in a babble of discordant voices”[1]

I think the Reformed Tradition, to the degree that we twenty-first-century Presbyterians understand it and appropriate it for the realities of our time, can energize and guide us into the future. And I believe that to the degree that we give up on this tradition and abandon it, we put our church in peril. I proposed ten years ago, and believe even more deeply today, that “traditional religion,” make that “Reformed traditional,” “as it lives and is expressed by traditional Churches, is important in ways the culture seems to understand even when we don’t. Reformed faith responds creatively and

positively to the questions that are being asked by our culture: questions of meaning and purpose, vocation and values, hope and fear."[2]

The Reformed Tradition was given to me by a congregation of Presbyterian Christians as they lived it and as their ministers were guided by it in their vocation of preaching. It is not a list of specific beliefs but a way of being Christian

It rests in trust in God, God's sovereignty, God's gracious and good creation, the God-given freedom and responsibility of the human creature, a realistic appraisal of the human condition, and an always hopeful trust in God's care and providence, all of it growing out of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church and Lord of all.

Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary, in her opening convocation address for the 2004 fall term told the gathered seminary community that the Reformed Tradition can best be understood in terms of "practices, habits." With her permission I will use her paradigm and expand upon it from my own experience.

Critical Thinking

The first Reformed Practice, or Habit, is Critical Thinking. Because the sovereignty of God is central to the Tradition, we understand that nothing else is sovereign: no earthly monarch, no institution, no creed or statement of faith. Furthermore, because of our willingness to be realistic about the human condition, our stubborn unwillingness to abandon or disguise what the Reformed Tradition has said about the universality and originality of human sin, we know that all human institutions, including and particularly the church, are in need of critical thinking, criticism, and reformation.

Because of the Tradition's emphasis on God's sovereignty, its adherents have always been critical of and often persecuted by political entities that are overinvested in their own sovereignty. It is no accident that

the only clergy to sign the Declaration of Independence was John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey and a Presbyterian minister. And it is no accident that Presbyterians were so involved in the cause of freedom from tyranny that the war for American Independence was referred to, on the floor of Parliament, as “that Presbyterian revolt.”

In the church, our emphasis on the sovereignty of God has led us to express a most remarkable affirmation that church councils can make mistakes, errors. To be a Reformed Christian means to acknowledge that none of us gets it right all the time. In fact, our trust in God’s sovereignty inspires us always to limit our trust in church bodies, even our own.

It also inspires us to be open to critical thinking outside the church. Reformed Christians are never afraid of intellectual inquiry and are on the side of intellectual and academic freedom. We welcome scientific and historic study in pursuit of more knowledge and understanding. Because God is sovereign, we are never afraid of new knowledge, new truth. Because we trust God’s sovereignty, we have always seen our missional responsibilities in terms of education. And so Presbyterians have led the way in support of public education, college and university education in our country and throughout the world.

Intentional Worldliness

As Reformed Christians, we begin with the incarnation, God’s coming into human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we know as the Christ. Libraries have been written abut the incarnation, but at the very heart of the believer’s faith is the clear affirmation in the mystical prologue to the Gospel according to John.

> And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. . . .

> No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

Reformed faith strives to keep in tension the two foci of incarnation:

- that we know who God is by looking at Jesus
- that Jesus, the incarnation (enfleshment) of God, was born into the world, loved
and lived in the world, and died a human death in the world

The world is where God chose to reveal Godself, the world God so loves as to send an only son for its salvation, the Fourth Gospel memorably proclaims.

So Reformed faith strives to take the world as seriously as God does, strives to love the world as radically as God does in Jesus Christ, strives to live as thoroughly in the world as Jesus himself did, strives to follow him obediently into the world he loves.

The church has always been tempted to live away from the world, to draw the distinction sharply between the sacred and the profane, otherworldly and worldly. Christianity has always lived uncomfortably with the influence of Greek dualism, which keeps showing up in Christian heresies down through the centuries and concludes essentially that Christian life is to be lived out-of-this-world, that Christian sensibility is not about the world of the flesh but the world of the spirit. The temptation has always been to disconnect faith and the world, the world of politics and economics, the real world in which people live.

It has been the particular gift of the Reformed Tradition to insist that because of the incarnation, the church and individual believers live thoroughly in the world. John Calvin not only wrote some of the most

important theology in history, he engaged the civic and political life of Geneva in the name of his incarnational faith.

Presbyterians are always to be found at the intersection of faith and culture, living out their faith in worldly acts of obedience and courage, kindness and compassion, justice and mercy. That commitment to the world means that Reformed churches like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will always be in a little trouble. Precisely because we take the world seriously, we find ourselves involved in issues and activities over which people disagree. In our own lifetime, those often controversial and divisive issues have included racial justice, economic justice, gender justice, peace, political and military oppression, and sexual orientation. Sometimes we all wish that our church would have fewer things to say about controversial issues. And we need the reminder that our church is intentionally worldly and thus inevitably involved in controversy precisely because it is incarnational and takes the world absolutely seriously.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

> I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life. . . . Later I discovered and am still discovering right up to the very moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe.[3]

And Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltman:

> If we want to live today, we must consciously will life. We must learn to love life with such a passion that we no longer become accustomed to the powers of destruction. We must overcome our own apathy and be seized by the passion for life.[4]

Grace and Gratitude

Reformed Theology rests on the theology of grace. We share with the heirs of Martin Luther the Reformation rediscovery that

> God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. . . . We even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:8, 11)

and

> We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. . . . And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law. (Galatians 2:16)

Reformed theology is a theology of grace, resting on St. Paul's understanding of faith and the law and salvation as God's gifts in Jesus Christ. We cannot win or earn our salvation. It is given in Jesus Christ. We cannot secure it by works of the law, by religious ritual, by following religion or church requirements. We are saved by grace. And Reformed theologians have understood and taught the critical understanding that the faithful life is not lived to make oneself worthy of God's love, but in profound gratitude for a love that one could never earn or deserve.

It is, Reformed theology understands, unconditional love, love with no strings attached. It is reflected in the story Jesus told about a father and two sons, each of whom strays from the father, the younger son by dissolute living in a far country where he squanders his father's resources, and an older son who distances himself from the father by his own pride and obstinacy and self-righteousness. It is a wonderfully radical story of grace—of a father who runs down the road to welcome his young son home and

who embraces and forgives the wayward young man even before he can speak the words of repentance he has so carefully rehearsed. Grace—and gratitude. And then the father leaves home to reclaim his eldest son, another prodigal, alienated by his own self-righteousness.

It was the great Reformed theologian Karl Barth who said that the experience of God's grace is like a child on Christmas morning showered with many gifts.

And Paul Tillich once wrote that the spiritual challenge for all of us is to "accept the fact that we are accepted."[5]

Reformed Christians are, therefore, uncomfortable with religion that seems to be suggesting that we must do certain things in order to win, deserve, earn, or be worthy of God's love. Grace is primary. God loves us. Our first and primary response is gratitude. Even as we confess our sin in corporate worship, Reformed Christians understand that grace comes first; like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, God extends forgiveness even before we get around to confessing. In fact, it is the miracle of God's love, God's truly amazing grace, that prompts authentic repentance.

In fact, the primacy of grace means that even our search for God, our personal faith journey, is an expression of God coming to us.

Psalm 139 promises

> O Lord, you have searched me and known me. . . .
> You search out my path and my lying down. . . .
> If I take the wings of the morning
> And settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
> Even there your hand shall lead me
> And your right hand shall hold me fast
> (Psalm 139:1, 3, 9–10)

And the hymn writer Calvin Laufer:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No, I was found of thee."

The Future of Reformed Theology and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

We live precariously in a time of great uncertainty and fear. After September 11, 2001, a consensus emerged among analysts of American culture that the world had changed in a fundamental way and that certainties upon which generations of Americans had built their lives, their politics, and worldview were destroyed the day the World Trade Center Towers fell. Suddenly we found ourselves uncertain about our role in the world among the family of nations and feeling not nearly as safe and secure as we had grown accustomed to feeling.

In a time of uncertainty and fear, a religion that is uncomplicated and simple will be attractive. The dilemma for Reformed faith is that our way of being Christian resists simplicity for simplicity's sake, in fact sees danger in oversimplifying both needs of human beings and religion's response. Reformed faith appreciates complexity and cultivates critical thinking, poses serious questions, encourages intellectual analysis. All of which is to say that maintaining good faith with our theological tradition will not be easy. In fact, the world in which we find ourselves living requires unprecedented leadership creativity and rigorous critical thinking.

In the meantime, our denomination continues to lose numerical strength and its prior prominence and influence in American society. The challenge ahead is to remain faithful to our Reformed way of being Christian, while at the same time responding creatively and faithfully to the changed and changing world in which we live. We must come to terms with the reality that we will not, in our lifetime, recover the prominence we once

enjoyed when our Stated Clerk's picture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Instead of expending our energy lamenting or fighting internally about who is to blame, we must, I believe, acknowledge our minority status and keep faith with it. God, after all, seems to prefer to work through minorities, through marginalized people. And so it may be that the Presbyterian Church's greatest and most faithful days lie ahead now.

Issues that Reformed Christians and Reformed churches are particularly gifted to address include:

> ***Globalization.*** The economic and political implications of globalization are enormous. So are the theological implications. We need new constructs, methodologies, and vocabulary to talk with people of other faiths.
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> ***Ecumenism.*** The revolutionary and groundbreaking ecumenical structures of the mid-twentieth century, which benefited from Presbyterian leadership and support, are themselves changing. The future requires new structures that take into account not only Roman Catholicism but also the rapid growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal movements throughout the world.
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> ***Education.*** Reformed/Presbyterian churches gave the world the gift of higher education—from elementary and secondary schools established throughout the American South for children of newly freed slaves to church-related colleges scattered throughout the North American continent. The solidification of public education accessible to all has fundamentally altered the environment for church-related education. Discovering a new way to be faithful in the context of higher education, a way to keep Christian faith rigorously

engaged in the academic world, authentically a partner in the intellectual quest, should be receiving our very best attention.

Authentic Witness and Mission. In a world of sometimes violent competing faith claims, the challenge for Reformed/Presbyterian churches will be to express the unconditional love of God we have experienced in Jesus Christ in ways he has called us to do. We are called to go into all the world, not to contend, argue, or battle other faiths, but to be "salt of the earth, light to the world." Our commission is clear, although we, like his surprised disciples, do not always see it.

> "When was it when we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it when we saw you sick or in prison and visited you.?" And the king will answer them, "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:37–40)

Conclusion

The Reformed Tradition, the Presbyterian way of being Christian, is in numerical decline in Western culture. Those of us who love the Tradition and our church are concerned about our declining membership and believe that together we ought to be doing something more creative than wringing our hands and finding someone to blame. It is important to understand that precisely because we are an old tradition and our churches were established early in the nation's and each community's history, we are not always as flexible as other, newer traditions. Many of our congregations are in places where the population itself is declining and so they cannot grow. Other Presbyterian congregations are strategically located where populations are increasing and are growing.

My hope, indeed my strong faith, is that when the Reformed/Presbyterian Tradition is intentionally expressed in the life of a congregation, when the gospel is proclaimed authentically, when issues are joined intelligently, when mission in the world is graciously offered, there will be a compelling liveliness and a faithfully authentic church.

I am comforted by Canadian Douglas John Hall's reminder that the Christendom in the midst of which the Reformation happened and the Reformed Tradition was born has now disappeared. We are in a new place. Free of the trappings of Christendom, Hall says, and I believe, we are free to be the church of Jesus Christ in radical new ways. (See Hall's *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity: Christian Mission and Modern Culture,* Trinity Press, 1993.)

And I am comforted by words spoken to me by my pastor, the Reverend Jay Walters, at my ordination in the same church that baptized, nurtured, and challenged me and gave me the Reformed way of being Christian. It was during the charge to the new minister. Jay's good words I now know are for the whole church. He said:

"You are not called to be successful. God calls you to be faithful."

Questions for discussion

Who taught you how to be a Presbyterian and how? (i.e., who appropriated the Reformed Theological Tradition to you?)

What "practices" continue to express the Reformed Tradition in the life of your congregation?

In what ways is your congregation living out a Reformed sense of mission in our globalized and diverse world?

Notes

1. Brian A. Gerrish, *Saving and Secular Faith: An Invitation to Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 56.
2. John M. Buchanan, *Being Church, Becoming Community* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), xii
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 226.
4. Jürgen Moltman, *The Passion for Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 22.
5. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1948), 162.